ON COMPANY COMMAND

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Recently I completed a tour of duty that included command of an infantry company. My experience as a lieutenant and a staff captain had prepared me for command as well as I could have expected. Still, once in command I was confronted with an environment and a challenge that my background could not have entirely anticipated; nothing less than the experience itself would have fully equipped me to function as a unit commander.

I wasn't the best company commander in my brigade, but I think I was a good one. And even though I didn't learn all the answers or face every possible situation, some of my company command experiences may be helpful to you, a company grade officer awaiting your first opportunity to command.

There is no getting around the fact that you will be an outsider when you take the guidon. Your natural concern at first will be to take positive control of the unit and assert yourself as the man in charge. This is a necessary and proper step, but there are various ways of doing it, some of them more effective than others.

Hopefully you will have done some homework before the ceremony and will have a working knowledge of your unit's mission, general strengths and weaknesses, and current SOPs. Soon after assuming command, most commanders meet with the officers and NCOs to break the ice and get everyone introduced. This can be a time for speechmaking, but you may choose a more reserved approach and merely introduce yourself, express your

appreciation for the chance to command the company, and speak briefly about what you hope to accomplish. It is good to keep in mind, though, that the oldtimers and veterans will be more interested in what you do than in what you say.

As the formally appointed commander and the senior ranking soldier and leader in the unit, you will enjoy a certain amount of built-in authority and autonomy right from the start. If you exercise them with due regard for the prerogatives of others and with the "sweet reasonableness" of common sense, you may find it easier to encourage support for your efforts. The natural resistance to a change of leadership can be largely overcome by a "we" approach instead of an "I" approach.

The unit's leaders will not try to supersede you, but they will want to feel that their opinions count for something and that you respect the authority they have earned (and need) to do their jobs. An effective way to reinforce this feeling is to involve your subordinate leaders in your decisions. Hearing their recommendations will enable you to make better informed and more substantive decisions and will help to keep you out of trouble. It will also give you a sense of the relative abilities of your leaders and a chance to know them better. And, not least, it will show them that you really do rely on their counsel and expertise and will help to foster that sense of teamwork that is so critical to the success of your company.

This is not to say that decisions will be made by committee. Once you've heard everyone's input, it is time to issue a clear and definitive decision, as well as guidance for its execution and implementation. As you become known as a decisive commander who depends on his subordinate leaders for information and advice, your concerns about establishing yourself as "the old man" will fade away and neither theatrics nor change for the sake of change will seem necessary.

Commanders and Staff

As a unit commander you will belong to a special circle within your battalion. Your brother commanders are members with you, and the battalion commander is its chief.

Most battalion commanders are remarkably similar. They are often combat veterans with several company commands under their belts and with extensive troop experience. They are well educated, graduates of command and staff colleges, and often have advanced civilian degrees as well. Along the way to battalion command, they have impressed—not occasionally, but over and over again—the people they have worked for and with. They represent the cream of the officer corps.

All of this does not guarantee that your commander will be a superstar. It does suggest, however, that he has demonstrated real talent and ability and is well qualified to be where he is.

Company command has been described as a never-ending juggling act, with some rubber balls that will bounce when dropped and some glass balls that will shatter. Most battalion commanders are looking for company commanders who can keep the glass balls in the air *all* of the time and the rubber balls in the air *most* of the time. Your glass balls will probably be troop welfare and safety, property accountability, maintenance, and training management. In a peacetime environment the statistical indicators of success in these areas, for better or worse, will probably determine how well you perform as a commander. For this reason it is important to devote your time and energy primarily to the important areas and only secondarily to other things that may interest you more.

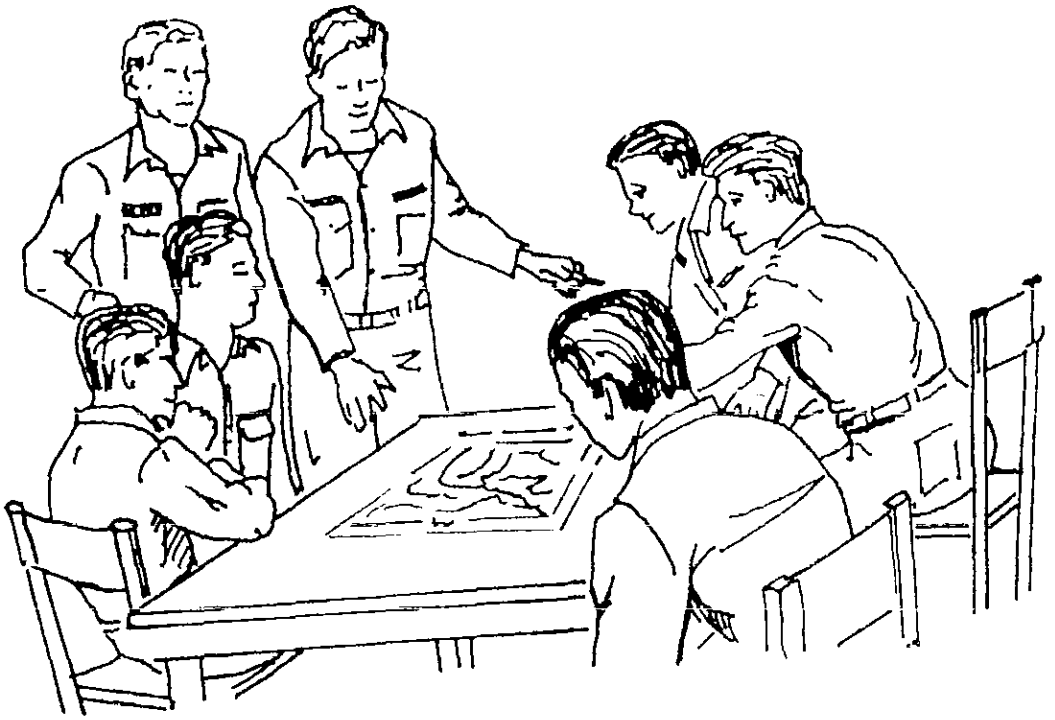
It is always good advice to learn early about your battalion commander's policies, priorities, and pet peeves. Strive to conform to them, but never be afraid to let him know instantly when something has gone wrong. Remember that he, too, is responsible to a higher authority and that bad news really does get worse with age. (Hell truly hath no fury like that of a lieutenant colonel who has been blindsided by his boss with bad news that he should have heard from you.) A good rule of thumb is to accept personal responsibility and forego excuses when your unit falls short, but to praise your soldiers and leaders by name when the unit does well. Anything less looks like either buck-passing or self-congratulations, neither of which is likely to benefit you or your unit.

Your fellow company commanders can be a great source of support, information, and comradeship and can materially affect your success in command. In some units there is an air of fierce competition between commanders that is both unseemly and unprofessional. While it is true that you will be evaluated against your peers, in a larger sense the success of one company commander does not in any way devalue the success of the others. After all, your commander is not interested in having a battalion with one outstanding company and the rest lackluster. The ideal is a well-balanced, capable unit whose components work smoothly together. When unit commanders like and trust each other, everyone benefits and no one loses.

The relationship between a company commander and the battalion staff officers also has its own nuances. Chances are you have served on a staff at some level before, and you will do well to remember how harried and dependent on others a staff officer's life can be.

If there is friction between a commander and a battalion staff officer, it is usually because each feels that the other is not supportive or is too interfering. Staff actions, to be effective in meeting a commander's needs, rely on timely and accurate input from the companies. Your performance in this area therefore directly affects a staff officer's ability to do his job. Conversely, you will find it difficult if not impossible to coordinate and execute your own programs without the willing support of the staff.

Soon after you assume command, it's a good idea to meet with each primary staff officer in the battalion (and with the CESO, motor officer, chaplain, and medical platoon leader as well) to begin developing a good working relationship.



You should encourage the staff members to get in touch with you personally to clear up any problem with your unit before taking it to the battalion commander. This is necessary from time to time because the staff often works with your first sergeant, executive officer, or commodity area chiefs instead of directly with you. You can fix late suspenses or poorly prepared recurring reports quickly, but only if you know that a problem exists. (Incidentally, it is a good idea to personally review all documents that go above your level for accuracy and correctness.)

The staff members should understand that you respect their functions and the requirements of their jobs, and they in turn should respect your prerogatives as a unit commander. For example, the staff should not inspect your unit without notifying you in advance, checking in with you when they arrive, and out-briefing you before they leave. Except for advance notification, of course, these conditions apply even to no-notice inspections. And if your unit is asked to provide some information or is to be noted for some shortcoming at a meeting or staff conference, it is common courtesy for the appropriate staff officer to give you a "heads up" in advance so you can prepare. (This works both ways, of course.)

Finally, you should tactfully point out that when a staff officer issues a written or oral directive to you or your unit, you will operate on the assumption that it has been cleared with the battalion commander and that it carries his blessing. Nothing can poison a company commander's relationship with the staff faster than its arbitrary exercise of authority that is not based on the battalion commander's expressed policies or desires. You should always feel that you work directly for the commanding officer of your battalion and never for the staff. Within this framework, however, it is in the best interest of everyone concerned to go the extra mile to insure smooth and harmonious relationships between commanders and staff.

A word about the battalion executive officer (XO) and command sergeant major (CSM): They may tend to be a bit more aggressive than other staff members about issuing directives that affect your unit, sometimes even in a personal manner as opposed to acting "for the commander." Since they exercise tangible and real authority (in practice, next only to the commander himself), this should not surprise you. Nevertheless, if you have reason to question such a directive, particularly when you believe it affects your unit negatively and you have not had a chance to provide input, you should feel within your rights as a commander to take action to resolve the matter instead of accepting things as they stand.

A private, friendly interview with the XO or CSM is a good first step. Often the issue can be cleared up by a good face-to-face talk. If not, you may ask the battalion commander to adjudicate the matter and rule on your objections. It is important to remember, though, that both the XO and the CSM are senior, experienced, confidential advisors who work closely with your boss every day. Whatever happens, you should strive to remain objective, professional, and conscious of their concerns as well as your own. If your relationship with them is compromised needlessly, you'll find it that much harder to do your job well.

Leading Leaders

It may surprise you to find that a large part of your com-

pany consists of leaders. Leading them well—developing, supervising, coaching, counseling, pushing, and pulling them—is your best guarantee of a successful unit and a great source of personal and professional satisfaction.

Your company's lieutenants will look to you to exemplify and define for them what being an officer is all about. They should understand clearly that they must be among the best all-round soldiers in the unit. They will probably not have the single best PT or marksmanship score, for example, but they should perform in most areas at a level well above that of your average soldier.

Lieutenants personally will direct some of the most sensitive and dangerous things your unit will do: live fire ranges, night movements, stream crossings, and helicopter exercises, for example. For this reason, it is important to spell out for them where they can afford to make mistakes and where they can't. In the field, troop safety and the security of sensitive items probably top the list. In garrison, the high-quality execution of additional duties, maintenance, and staying on top of the soldiers' problems come first. In both environments, tactical proficiency and preparing and executing good training are crucial.

Consciously or not, you will probably expect more from your officers than from anyone else, and this is as it should be if leadership by example is to have meaning. It is sometimes wise, though, to temper your desire for high standards and performance with compassion for youth and inexperience, particularly for very new officers. In this formative stage, the lessons they learn from you will greatly influence their later development. Your good example will go a long way toward shaping them into the lieutenants you'll want and need.

NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICERS

It is the noncommissioned officers, however, who in the final analysis make or break a unit. Good ones can compensate for most officer weaknesses at the company level, while poor NCO leadership is extremely tough to overcome through the efforts of the company officers alone.

For this reason, I place the first sergeant as co-equal in importance with the commander. That's a strong statement, but leaving aside purely statistical indicators (though his efforts are crucial there, too), it's fairly easy to demonstrate that first sergeants have a lot to say about things that really matter on the battlefield—things like troop morale, the level of individual training in the unit, discipline, and good administrative and logistical support. The combination of a weak commander and a weak first sergeant is usually enough to keep a unit sidetracked no matter how good its soldiers may be.

It will help matters greatly if you and your first sergeant can develop a close personal relationship, but a give-and-take *working* relationship is absolutely necessary if you are to function as a command team. Both of you will want to talk long and hard about your expectations of each other. As the most experienced soldier in the unit, the first sergeant may expect, even demand, a large role in the decisionmaking process. And he should get it, so long as the quality of his advice and his performance warrants it.

If he is allowed to do his job, your first sergeant will relieve you of a big part of the burden of command. In your private talks, you should give him free rein to express his opinions on anything and everything. In front of the troops, both of you should present an air of mutual respect for and confidence in each other. By freely exchanging experiences and ideas, sharing responsibilities and duties, and exemplifying the professional qualities you expect of your officers and NCOs, you and the first sergeant can build a command team that will take your unit a long way.

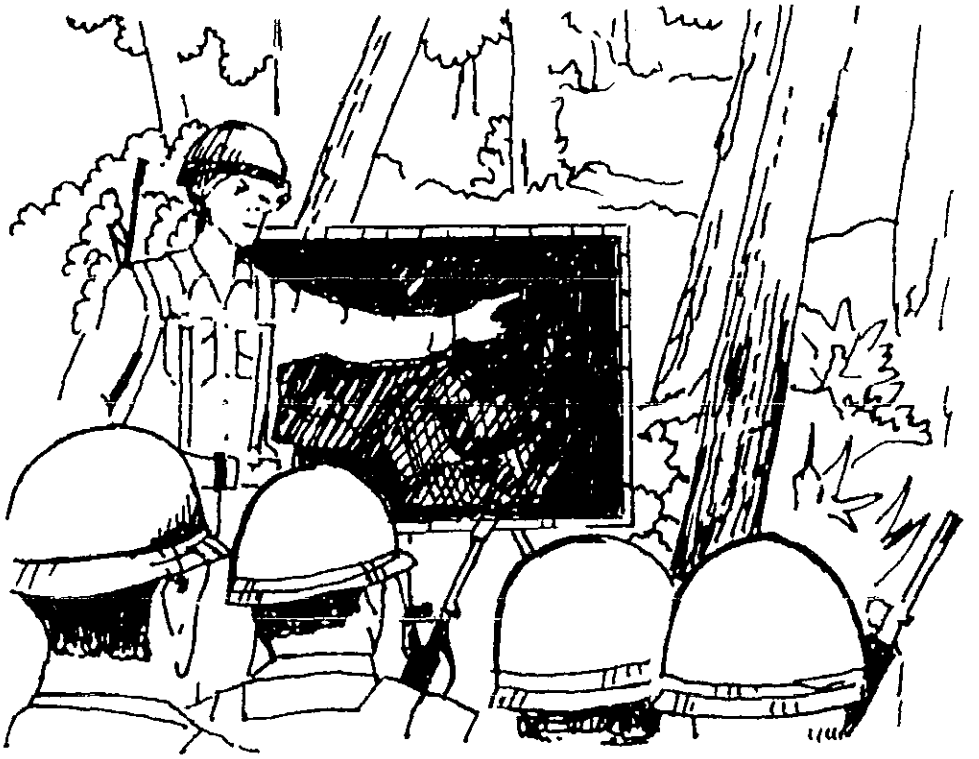
In general, the discipline, standards, and professional development of your noncommissioned officers are the first sergeant's responsibility. But anything you can do to accentuate the status of all your noncommissioned officers will help build an understanding of just how important and responsible their jobs are. Even the most junior NCO ought to understand that he is different, in a very special way, from the soldiers he leads. Once each junior NCO learns that every dirty weapon, late soldier, missed appointment, or low SQT score in the fire team or squad is his personal responsibility, you'll have the beginnings of a good leadership climate—as long as he also gets the credit for training good marksmen and drivers, soldiers of the month, and EIB winners.

PLATOON SERGEANTS

Just as battalion and company commanders belong to an inner circle, your platoon sergeants also belong to a time-honored and select organization. It consists of the senior noncommissioned officers of your company and the battalion. Much of what goes on in the battalion is set in motion by these experienced and forceful men. When they speak it will often be through the first sergeant and the command sergeant major, and they will have a big voice in determining just how good your unit becomes.

You need to be aware that their perspective, and their agenda, can be very different from yours. They are there for the long haul, while you and the other officers will come and go. Often their view of where the company is and what it needs to do, formed by months and years of personal observation and experience, is singularly on target. Although your platoon sergeants will not be afraid to express their opinions to you, much of their work will be done purposely out of sight of the officers. For one reason, it is important for the troops to realize that much of what NCOs do doesn't require the constant supervision and validation of a commissioned officer. Everyone can learn and benefit when these key leaders are allowed to function as the crucial troop leaders they are intended to be.

As a commander, your relationship with your soldiers will be different in some important ways. For the first time, you will have the authority to reward and punish their



behavior, instead of recommending these actions to a higher authority. Your input on evaluation reports and the decisions you make on promotions, schooling, and the slotting of personnel within your unit will have a major effect on the careers of your soldiers. While you can (and should) avail yourself of the experience and knowledge of your subordinate leaders, ultimately you must make the tough decisions and then live with them.

The Troops

This fact alone tends to distance a commander from intimate, personal relationships with others in the unit. This detachment is an extension of the phenomenon all leaders experience, but its effects are, I think, more keenly felt by those serving in command positions. Within the limits defined by the command relationship, however, it is surely possible to exercise command in an approachable, personable, and empathetic manner. Genuine (as opposed to artificial) gestures (such as helping a machinegunner clean his weapon, pulling a radio watch in the field late at night, or spelling your radio telephone operator with the radio on a tough road march) will cement your soldier-to-soldier relationship with your men and contribute to the richness of your common experience with them. Although it is often hard in today's environment to be with your soldiers all (or even most) of the time, your efforts to do so won't go unnoticed.

If the respect of your troops is important to you, there are some fatal errors you should strive to avoid. Your men won't appreciate being misled or kept in the dark. They will want to know exactly what's going on, even when it's not pleasant, and they will expect you to stand up for them when simple justice demands it. The will have ways of knowing when you do stand up for them, but they won't expect you to boast about it in order to win their approval.

They will expect you to live up to every standard you insist upon for them. They will know how to take it when you find it necessary to speak sharply to them, but in this Army they will not stand for a commander who is abusive or insulting to them. They won't mind an occasional mistake from you if you learn from it, but if you try to appear all-knowing in the face of mistakes, your credibility cannot help suffering.

Your soldiers will expect you to be fair with them and will tend to equate your brand of justice with your consistency in rewarding and punishing their behavior. Whether you are tough or lenient, your men can adapt so long as your ground rules are clear and meet a reasonable test of common sense and equity. Finally, they will never forgive you for not being there when it really counts. On a punishing road march, a tough field problem in miserable weather, or an all-night final once-over before a major inspection, they expect and deserve to see you there. More than your words, your actions in meeting these kinds of expectations in both the duty and family dimensions will convince your men that you not only know their needs but that you care.

I know you will be amazed, as I was, at the talent and

diversity that can be found in a company of soldiers. You will meet artists, carpenters, mechanics, musicians, and computer experts as well as linguists, cooks, athletes, and photographers. They will be proud of their skills and most will love having their talents used and recognized. By combining your imagination with theirs, you will be able to make your company a little better than it was before.

By and large, your soldiers are there because they want to be. They won't mind being tired and dirty as long as you are too, and as long as they think they're doing something realistic and useful. They will know deep down what they are there for, and they will be ready to answer the bell if it comes to that. And commanding them should make you feel prouder, and more humble, than anything in your life ever has.

Command Techniques

As a new commander you will have great hopes for your unit and many ideas you'll want to implement. You should understand from the start, though, that the unit will be, at best, an imperfect instrument of your will; that is, it will reflect your general approach and personality in appearance and performance, but it won't respond perfectly to your expectations at all times or in all situations. Other factors will also influence the unit—factors such as the overall command climate in the battalion, the personalities and abilities of your senior NCOs, the rate of personnel turnover, and so on. For this reason, it is worthwhile to reflect on how you can have the most positive influence on your unit, given inescapable constraints on resources and time. Your best friends in solving this problem will be good time management and a sharp, realistic priority of roles, goals, and objectives.

Time management is nothing more than spending the least possible time on the less important matters and the most time on what really counts. Anything you can do to save time will help; anything that wastes time is your enemy. There are numerous techniques available, but here are a few that worked for me:

Your operations section can prepare for you a personal notebook for use both in garrison and in the field. The enclosures might include a personal data sheet on each soldier and some laminated 5x8 cards, each with a detailed monthly training calendar so that the next 90 days of detailed training plans are at your fingertips.

In a notebook flap, carry a copy of the current day's personnel status report; on the back have your first sergeant list known inbound soldiers, projected losses, personnel on temporary duty, pending disciplinary cases, and so on, all by name. You may not be able to match the first sergeant's instant recall, but with this information you'll always know your unit's status.

A copy of the current week's training schedule and a list of important phone numbers will complete the notebook. Add a large, waterproofed map of the reservation with firing ranges and firing points, impact areas, landing zones, and so forth, and you should be well equipped to answer most questions or refresh your memory at a moment's notice.

The standard technique of working up a "things to do" list, with the critical items starred, will help you remember important meetings and requirements and will enable you to knock out many minor tasks in the spare five minutes you find here and there throughout the day.

Casual and informal meetings with the first sergeant and the lieutenants—say just before PT, over coffee in the mess hall, and just before closing out the day—will keep everyone up to speed and on top of things. Normally, only one scheduled meeting a week with your key leaders is really necessary (usually to disseminate information from the battalion and review upcoming training or commitments), with others called only when absolutely needed. By avoiding useless conferences and keeping strictly to an agenda when you do meet, you'll save large blocks of your time and you won't waste the time of others.

It will help if you schedule military justice and open-door interviews after the unit has been released for the day. This will eliminate the common practice of keeping all the troops standing around while you are busy with matters that don't directly affect them.

MILITARY JUSTICE

On the subject of military justice, you may well find that the liberal use of counseling statements, local letters of reprimand, and summarized Article 15 actions will not only save time in the long run but will actually reduce the incidence of serious breaches of discipline. Some commanders shun these measures on the grounds that they lack any real punitive punch. But I found that by addressing a problem soldier at the first indication of trouble, making it a matter of record, and confronting him in a formal disciplinary setting, I was able to turn many of them around without permanently affecting their future careers. When we overlook problem behavior up to the point where it becomes serious and then hammer a soldier, we fail not only in our responsibility to the soldier and the unit but to the Army as well.

There are some things that will require your personal and detailed attention. These include property accountability, training management, important training events, soldier problems that have not been solved at lower levels, and activities dictated by higher authority (such as officer professional development, staff calls, and the like). You will be greatly tempted to expand your personal participation into ever-increasing areas and activities. It is advisable to push your other leaders to do their jobs, spot checking and scheduling courtesy inspections periodically, instead of immersing yourself in the detail of execution. It is the commander's job to issue general policy guidance, provide the time and resources to get the job done, and follow up on mission execution. By implementing effec-

tive and comprehensive SOPs and encouraging your chain of command to lead and to solve problems at each echelon, you'll find more time to concentrate on those missions that can't be delegated.

This leads directly to the subject of setting priorities for your company. Even a casual glance at mandatory training shows that it is difficult if not impossible to cover everything well. SQT, CTT, EIB, and ARTEP tasks from squad through company level; AR 350-1 tasks; local training requirements; and support and mission cycle commitments add up to literally hundreds of separate, distinct subject areas. You must do your best to satisfy these obligations. Some, however, are more important than others. The trick is to settle on a handful of truly key skill areas and focus on having your unit master these.

PRIORITY LIST

Obviously, your priority list of training goals must not conflict markedly with the training guidance you receive from above. Within this framework there is usually some maneuver room in which to exercise discretion. A good place to start is to ask the question: If I had to deploy with my unit tomorrow, what would we have to be able to do, as a bare minimum, to execute our combat mission? Your answer to that question should lead you to a more precise view of what your current state of training is and where you need to be.

After reviewing training records and meeting with battalion and company leaders and training personnel, for example, you may decide that you want to be sure that your company can at least meet baseline standards of proficiency- to move, shoot, and communicate—under any conditions. There are hundreds of skills associated with these fundamental areas.

One successful commander I know of challenged his company to master only the following handful of combat tasks: land navigation, forced marches, and immediate action drills (move); employment of crew-served weapons and snipers, individual marksmanship, and use of mines (shoot); and radio-telephone procedure, radio maintenance in the field, and field expedient antennas (communicate).

This unit did not ignore its many other required training subjects. But whatever it did, it stressed repeatedly its few combat priorities. In time it could execute them well at night, in adverse weather, when fatigued, and even after personnel changes. These became the yardsticks by which the soldiers measured themselves. The unit could not outperform its peers in every field of endeavor, but it was unmatched in these most basic areas, in the things its commander felt counted most. And it was without question the most combat-ready outfit in the brigade.

You may decide that your unit should concentrate on training in other areas. So long as there is no serious conflict with your commander's views on the subject, that is your prerogative as a company commander. But you should at least consider the fact that if you try to cover everything evenly and comprehensively, your training may lack focus and definition—your unit will gain an acquaintance with a lot of things but a mastery of only a few.

Final Thoughts

These, then, are the thoughts that remain with me while my days as a company commander are still fresh in my mind. I know that I have left out much of the essence of the command experience and that my own experiences are incomplete. But I hope the lessons that came my way as a company commander will be useful to others who look forward as I did to the thrill of command.

It is sometimes said that company command is the first test of future military greatness, that a successful general officer is nothing more than a successful company commander writ large. Perhaps this overstates the case, but successful command is certainly the standard by which we are measured for larger responsibilities and opportunities.

There are those who view command as a necessary ordeal to be endured and survived as a means of remaining and progressing in the Army. Most, however, approach it with that mixture of apprehension and exhilaration that is reserved only for the toughest challenges and achievements in life. Believe me when I say that for all the relief and satisfaction that comes with the end of a successful command, when it is time to move on, you will deeply miss the fellowship, the sense of mission, and the feeling of belonging that define the command experience.

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